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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 001379

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SUBJECT: LEBANESE ANALYZE SAAD HARIRI'S INTENTIONS

REF: BEIRUT 1355

Classified By: Jeffrey Feltman, Ambassador, per 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

1. (S) In a one-on-one conversation on the margins of a larger session (reftel), former Prime Minister Najib Mikati told the Ambassador that, in two recent meetings, MP Saad Hariri complained that USG backing of Fouad Siniora was coming at Saad's expense. Hariri and his stepmother Nazek were thus more determined than ever to see Saad replace Siniora as prime minister after the election of a new president. Hariri, underestimating the importance of Lebanon's presidency, is ready to make a compromise deal with Hizballah, Mikati warned. Separately, Minister of Communications Marwan Hamadeh expressed concern that Hariri had come to a quiet understanding with Hizballah regarding the Hizballah telephone network, by which Hizballah would cut its Beirut lines in return for tacit acceptance of its networks in the south and Biqa'. Hariri advisor Ghattas Khoury, while acknowledging the telecom deal, rejected Hamadeh's suggestion that there might be a broader Hariri-Hizballah understanding (although he acknowledged that Hizballah officials have expressed interest in brokering a Hariri-Hassan Nasrallah meeting). Khoury insisted that Hariri will become PM after presidential elections, but not through a deal with Hizballah. Khoury also rejected the rumor that Hariri had sent him with a message to LAF Commander Michel Sleiman, promising Sleiman Hariri backing for the presidency. Hariri remains committed to March 14 presidential candidates, Khoury said. End summary.

SAAD HARIRI DETERMINED  
TO BECOME PM, MIKATI REPORTS

2. (S) At the conclusion of a larger meeting on 9/4 (reftel), former Prime Minister Najib Mikati talked one-on-one with the Ambassador. While vacationing in Monaco, Mikati said, he and his brother Taha visited MP Saad Hariri (also there) twice. Hariri made it clear to the Mikatis that he wanted to become PM after presidential elections (when the start of a new presidential term will, constitutionally, force the resignation of Siniora cabinet). But Hariri expressed concern that the USG is not behind him. Asked why Saad would think that, Mikati said that Saad had concluded that USG backing for Fouad Siniora was coming at his expense. Believing that the longer he waited to become PM the more likely it would be for the Hariri political legacy to evaporate, Hariri told Mikati that he could not delay any

longer to move into the Grand Serail. In addition, Nazek Hariri, Rafiq's widow (and Saad's stepmother), spoke very bitterly about Siniora's presumptuousness when Mikati visited her in Paris in August. According to Mikati, Nazek was more focused on ridding Lebanon of the hated Siniora than on getting a new president.

¶3. (S) Mikati said that he tried to argue with Hariri that becoming PM now was not a good idea, for a variety of reasons. Wait until after the 2009 legislative elections, Mikati urged; the upcoming cabinet will be transitional in nature. "But he insists," Mikati said. In Mikati's view, Hariri's obsession with the premiership is dangerous. Hariri seems to have concluded that the presidency doesn't matter and that he can thus make any kind of compromise he wishes on the presidential succession, as long as he is ensured of becoming PM. Mikati believes that this is a mistake, for Hariri is setting himself up to be too soft with Hizballah and too dismissive of Christian interests. According to Mikati, Hariri, convinced that the presidency doesn't matter and concerned that the USG doesn't really want him, is preparing himself for some kind of deal with Hizballah.

DEAL ON HIZBALLAH TELECOM NETWORK:  
BEIRUT LINES CUT, OTHERS TO REMAIN  
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¶4. (S) Separately, Minister of Communications Marwan Hamadeh also said that he was beginning to wonder whether there might be some kind of deal between Hariri and Hizballah, using the channel of Wissam Hassan (the Hariri-appointed head of the Internal Security Forces' intelligence division) and Wafiq Safa (Hizballah's security

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chief). The Hariri-affiliated media and even Siniora had fallen silent regarding the "scandal" of the separate Hizballah telephone network, Hamadeh noted. Probing into the matter, Hamadeh claimed to have discovered that Hassan and Safa had come to an understanding by which Hizballah's Beirut lines would be cut, in return for tacit acceptance of Hizballah's lines in the south and Biqa' Valley. Hamadeh wondered if this was an isolated Hizballah-Hariri understanding. (Separately, Deputy PM and Defense Minister Elias Murr had also alerted us to the Hassan-Safa deal.)

NO BROADER HARIRI-HIZBALLAH DEAL  
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¶5. (S) Receiving the Ambassador at his house on 9/7, former MP Ghattas Khoury, one of Hariri's closest advisors, acknowledged the telecom understanding (although he spun it as a temporary measure only, taken to eliminate the Beirut lines immediately). But, Khoury insisted, there is no broader Hariri-Hizballah deal under way or under contemplation. Yes, Hariri wants to be PM, but he will do so through the regular parliamentary consultative process, not through any private deal with Hizballah. "Do you really think that Saad would be making a deal with Hizballah, when Hizballah is threatening (Saudi Ambassador) Khoja?" (At a dinner the following night, Khoury mentioned to us in passing that Hizballah officials have expressed interest in re-starting the contact between the Hariris and Hizballah, proposing a meeting between Hariri and Hassan Nasrallah. But Hariri is not now pursuing this idea, Khoury said.)

RUMORS OF HARIRI BACKING SLEIMAN  
NOT TRUE, KHOURY INSISTS  
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¶6. (S) Khoury also cautioned that the USG should get used to the idea of a Hariri premiership, as "Fouad won't be coming back" (as PM). From the Hariri perspective, Siniora "has become too difficult" (a description we suspect is a euphemism for "too prominent"). The Ambassador asked about the rumors that Hariri had sent Khoury to LAF Commander

Michel Sleiman to promise Sleiman the presidency, after the inevitable elimination of all March 14 candidates. Khoury said that his message was indeed one of Hariri support for Sleiman, but in his current role as Commander. After March 14 allies Walid Jumblatt and Samir Geagea had attacked Sleiman publicly, Hariri used Khoury to send a conciliatory message. March 14 needs the army, Khoury argued, and Jumblatt and Geagea had behaved irresponsibly. So Hariri had to compensate. But he did not promise Sleiman the presidency. Hariri remains committed to a March 14 choice, with Nassib Lahoud and Boutros Harb as first and second choices, respectively. (That said, over dinner on 9/8, Khoury -- once a presidential contender himself -- seemed suspiciously eager to evaluate the chances of several compromise candidates, suggesting that he, if not his boss, is already starting to back away from pushing a March 14 choice.)

COMMENT

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17. (S) We are, of course, relying on second-hand information regarding Saad Hariri's intentions. With the newspapers here full of his reported emissary role in Pakistani politics, Saad is rumored to be returning to Lebanon in the coming days, for his first trip here in weeks.

This will give us the opportunity to quiz him directly on his thinking regarding the presidency and the premiership. But in previous meetings we have heard him express unequivocally his desire to become PM after presidential elections. We doubt that this view has changed. (Khoury, again over dinner on 9/8, was already plotting out options for Saad for cabinet ministers.) Certainly, Saad would not want to cede the position to Najib Mikati: there would be a risk that Mikati could combine the powers of the office with his immense personal fortune to sideline Saad permanently. Moreover, despite Mikati's long-standing (and supposedly -- but doubtfully -- suspended) ties to Syria, Mikati is viewed relatively positively by the Lebanese public because of his careful stewardship of the 2005 cabinet oversaw the withdrawal of the Syrian troops and legislative elections. Thinking about the arguments against Siniora, we find a certain irony in the fact that Siniora's success as PM has led the Hariri family to make the same arguments about Fouad

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that March 8 posits: that, essentially, Fouad enjoys too much international backing.

18. (S) As for the presidency, we find it plausible that Saad would be looking for a compromise that would avoid a confrontation. After all, a confrontation might cripple his premiership from the start. If March 14 elects a president unrecognized by the March 8-Aoun forces, then it becomes difficult to assemble a cabinet and persuade Nabih Berri to convene parliament for a vote of confidence. Saad could find himself PM of a besieged cabinet without a vote of confidence -- an embattled cabinet that faces a Hizballah-backed second cabinet of some sort that, while not constitutionally legitimate, would have considerable popular support. But Saad's March 14 allies, whom he needs as much as they need him, will probably keep him focused for the time being on March 14 presidential contenders. But, undoubtedly, Saudi Arabia's position on Lebanon's next president will be an important factor in Saad's ultimate thinking.

FELTMAN